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U.S. Envoy Visits Controversial Gaza Aid Site Amid Warnings of Famine Crisis

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A senior U.S. official visited a controversial food distribution site in the southern Gaza Strip this week, as humanitarian experts warned of a looming famine in the war-torn territory. The facility is operated by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), an American contractor backed by Israel, and has drawn international criticism for its heavily militarized and chaotic distribution practices.

U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, along with U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee, toured the GHF aid site in Rafah on Friday. The area has suffered extensive destruction and population displacement during Israel's ongoing military campaign against Hamas. According to Witkoff, the visit was aimed at gaining a clear understanding of the situation on the ground and working on a strategy to increase aid delivery to civilians in Gaza. He spent over five hours in the area but did not meet with officials from the United Nations (U.N.), which has been operating aid missions in the region since the conflict began.

Since May, over 1,000 Palestinians have reportedly been killed while seeking aid near GHF-run sites or U.N. convoys, according to health officials and the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). However, both the Israeli military and GHF deny that their actions have directly caused civilian deaths, maintaining that only warning shots or non-lethal measures like pepper spray were used to control crowds. GHF disputed claims that anyone was killed at their sites during Friday's visit.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) criticized the GHF operations in a report issued the same day, describing the aid system as "flawed" and "militarized." The group claims the current setup has turned humanitarian aid distribution into dangerous, often deadly, events. According to HRW, vulnerable Palestinians are left at greater risk, especially as Israeli forces reportedly control movement by firing near crowds en route to aid centers.

Despite the criticism, GHF spokesperson Chapin Fay defended the group's work, stating the organization has delivered over 100 million meals since May. He added that the visit by U.S. officials underscored a commitment to prioritize aid to civilians, not to Hamas. All four GHF facilities are located in zones under Israeli military control, contributing to the sites becoming hotspots of desperation for many Palestinians.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) acknowledged firing warning shots near the Rafah site but said they were hundreds of meters away from the actual aid distribution area. Officials claimed those targeted were acting suspiciously and ignored commands to stay back. The military reported no confirmed casualties in that incident but said investigations were ongoing. Meanwhile, reports from Shifa Hospital in northern Gaza stated that 23 people were killed near the Zikim Crossing, the main aid entry point to the region. Medical officials cited gunfire as the primary cause of injuries.

In a separate incident, the Palestinian Red Crescent reported 11 deaths at a Gaza City aid location. No response was issued from the IDF regarding those fatalities. HRW's report concluded that the dangerous conditions make it nearly impossible for Palestinians to receive aid safely under the current system.

The situation continues to draw global concern. Germany's Foreign Minister recently visited Taybeh, a Palestinian Christian village in the West Bank, and condemned rising settler violence. He criticized Israeli settlement activity as a barrier to peace while also calling on Hamas to disarm and release the remaining hostages from the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel.

That Hamas-led attack, which killed approximately 1,200 people and involved the abduction of 251 others, triggered the current war. According to Gaza's Hamas-run Health Ministry, Israel's retaliatory operations have since resulted in over 60,000 Palestinian deaths. While the ministry does not separate militant from civilian casualties, the United Nations continues to use its figures as a primary source for conflict-related data.

As the humanitarian crisis deepens, concerns remain about the safety, efficacy, and political motivations behind the ongoing aid distribution efforts in Gaza. With mounting pressure from human rights organizations and the international community, the spotlight is now on how future aid missions will be conducted, and who they will ultimately serve.